

READINGS

[Essay]

THE IDOLS OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

By Curtis White, from a two-part series published this spring in Orion. White's "The Spirit of Disobedience" appeared in the April 2006 issue of Harper's Magazine.

Environmental destruction proceeds apace in spite of all the warnings, the good science, the 501(c)(3) organizations with their memberships in the millions, the poll results, and the martyrs perched high in the branches of sequoias or shot dead in the Amazon. This is so not because of a power that we must resist. It is because we are weak and fearful. Only a weak and fearful society could invest so much desperate energy in protecting activities that are the equivalent of suicide.

For instance, trading carbon-emission credits, and creating markets in greenhouse gases as a means of controlling global warming, is not a way of saying we're so confident in the strength of the free-market system that we can trust it to fix even the problems it creates. No, it's a way of saying that we are so frightened by the prospect of stepping outside the market system on which we depend for our national wealth, our jobs, and our sense of normalcy that we will let the logic of that system try to correct its own excesses even when we know we're just kidding ourselves. This delusional strategy is

embedded in the Kyoto Protocol, which is little more than a complex scheme to create an international market in pollution. Even Kyoto, of which we speak longingly—"Oh, if only we would join it!"—is not an answer to our problem but a capitulation to it, so concerned is it to protect what it calls "economic growth and development." Kyoto is a form of whistling past the graveyard. And it is not just corporations who do this whistling; we all have our own little stake in the world capitalism has made, so we all do the whistling.

The problem for even the best-intentioned environmental activism is that it imagines it must confront a problem external to itself. Confront the bulldozers. Confront the chain saws. Fight the power. What the environmental movement does not acknowledge is that something in the very fabric of our daily life is deeply antinature as well as antihuman. It inhabits not just bad guy CEOs but nearly every working American, environmentalists included.

It is true that there are cruel and greedy CEOs, few in number, who are indifferent to everything except money, and so the North Atlantic gets stripped of cod and any number of other species taken incidentally in what is the factory trawler's wet version of a scorched-earth policy. Nevertheless, all that we perceive to be the destructiveness of corporate culture in relation to nature is not the consequence of its power, or of its capacity for dominating nature ("taming," as it was once put, as if nature were a lion act at the circus). Believing in powerful corporate evildoers as the source of our problems, we think in cartoons.

Besides, corporations are powerless to be anything other than what they are. Far from being perverse merchants of greed hell-bent on destruction, these entities are as bewildered as we are. Capitalism has a way of reasoning, a *logos*. Capitalism is in the position of the notorious scorpion who persuades the fox to ferry him across a river, arguing that he won't sting the fox because it wouldn't be in his interest to do so, since he'd drown, too. But when he stings the fox anyway, he can only say, "I did it because it is in my nature." In the same way, it's not as if businessmen perversely seek to destroy their own world. They have vacation homes in New England and enjoy walks in the forest. They simply have other priorities.

The idea that corporate villains are to blame for the sorry state of the natural world is

[Poem]

EDEN

By Ina Rousseau, from the April issue of Poetry. The poem first appeared in South Africa in 1954. Translated from the Afrikaans by J. M. Coetzee.

Somewhere in Eden, after all this time,
does there still stand, abandoned, like
a ruined city, gates sealed with grisly nails,
the luckless garden?

Is sultry day still followed there
by sultry dusk, sultry night,
where on the branches fallow and purple
the fruit hangs rotting?

Is there still, underground,
spreading like lace among the rocks
a network of unexploited lodes,
onyx and gold?

Through the lush greenery
their wash echoing afar
do there still flow the four glassy streams
of which no mortal drinks?

Somewhere in Eden, after all this time,
does there still stand, like a city in ruins,
forsaken, doomed to slow decay,
the failed garden?

what Francis Bacon called an "idol of the tribe." An idol is a truth based on insufficient evidence but maintained by constant affirmation within a tribe of believers. Idols do not fall easily or often. Tribes are capable of exerting will based on principles, but they are capable only with the greatest difficulty of willing the destruction of their own principles. It's as if they feel that it is better to stagger from frustration to frustration than to return honestly to the question, Does what we believe actually make sense? Fallen idols are always accompanied by tragic disillusionment, but this is in fact a good thing. If they don't fall, there is no hope for discovering the real problems and the best and truest responses to them. All environmentalists understand that the global crisis we are experiencing requires urgent action, but not everyone understands that if our activism is driven by idols we can exhaust ourselves with effort while having little effect on the crisis. Our efforts may instead sustain the crisis.

The belief that corporate power is the unique source of our problems is not the only idol we are subject to. There is an idol even in the language we use to account for our problems. Our dependence on the scientific language of "environment," "ecology," "diversity," "habitat," and "ecosystem" is a way of acknowledging the superiority of the kind of rationality that serves corporate capitalism. You can pump this many tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere without disturbing the major climatic systems. This much contiguous habitat is necessary to sustain a population allowing for a viable gene pool for this species. We'll keep a list, a running tally of endangered species, and we'll monitor their numbers, and when that number hits a specified threshold we'll say they are "healthy," or we'll say they are "extinct."

I am not speaking here of all the notorious problems associated with proving scientifically the significance of environmental destruction. My concern is with the wisdom of using as our primary weapon the rhetoric and logic of the entities we suspect of causing our problems in the first place. Perhaps we support legalistic responses to problems, with all their techno-scientific descriptors, out of a sense that this is the best we can do for the moment. But eventually we come to adopt this mind-set ourselves. Corporate executives are perfectly comfortable with it, and corporate philanthropists give their money to environmental organizations that speak its language. Unfortunately, it also turns environmentalists into quislings, collaborators, and virtuous practitioners of a cost-benefit logic figured in songbirds.

Because we have accepted this rationalist *logos* as the only legitimate means of debate, we are willing to think that what we need is a balance be-



"Gletscherzunge, Island, 1999," by Olaf Otto Becker, from the series Under the Nordic Light, was on view this spring at Stephen Cohen Gallery, in Los Angeles.

tween the requirements of human economies and the "needs" of the natural world. It is as if we were negotiating a trade agreement with the animals and trees unlucky enough to share space with us. What do you need? we ask them. What are your minimum requirements? We need to know the minimum because we're not likely to leave you more than that. We're going to consume any "excess." Unless, of course, you taste good. There is always room for an animal that tastes good.

We use our most basic vocabulary, words like "ecosystem," with a complete innocence, as if we couldn't imagine that there might be something perilous in it. What if such language were actually the announcement of the defeat of what we claim to want? Would people and foundations be as willing to send contributions to The Nature Conservancy if the leading logic of the organization were not "ecosystems" but "respect for life" or

"reverence for creation"? Such notions are, for many of us, compromised by associations with the Catholic Church and Evangelicalism, and they don't loosen the purse strings of philanthropy. "Let's keep a nice, clean scientific edge between us and religion," we protest. In the end, environmental science criticizes not only corporate destructiveness but also (as it always has) more spiritual notions of nature.

Environmentalism concludes that the best thing it can do for nature is to make a case for it, as if it were always making an argument before a jury with the backing of the best science. Good children of the Enlightenment, we keep expecting Reason to prevail (and in a perverse and destructive way, it does prevail). We even seem to think that the natural system should work in concert with our economic system. Why, we argue, that rainforest might contain

the cure for cancer. By which we also mean that it could provide profitable products for the pharmaceutical industry and local economies. (God help the doomed indigenous culture once the West decides that it has an economy that needs assistance.) Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* may have distressing things to say about global warming, but subconsciously it is an extended apology for scientific rationality, the free market, and our corrupted democracy. Gore doesn't have to defend these things directly; he merely pretends that nothing else exists.

There would be nothing inappropriate or undesirable in understanding our relation to nature in spiritual terms or poetic terms or, with Emerson and Thoreau, in good old American transcendental terms, but there is no broadly shared language in which to do this. So we are forced to resort to what is in fact a lower common denominator—the languages of science and bureaucracy. These languages have legitimacy in our culture, a legitimacy they possess largely because of the thoroughness with which they discredited Christian religious discourse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But many babies went out with the bathwater of Christian dogma and superstition. One of those was morality. Even now, science can't say why we ought not to harm the environment except to say that we shouldn't be self-destructive. Even avowed Christians have been slow to recall this spiritualized relationship to the world. Only recently have American evangelicals begun thinking of the environment in terms of what they call "creation care." We don't have to be born again to agree that one of the most powerful arguments missing from the environmentalist's case is reverence for what simply is.

You cannot defeat something that you imagine to be an external threat to you when it is in fact internal to you, when its life is your life. The truth is, our idols are actually a great convenience. It is convenient to imagine a power beyond us because that means we don't have to examine our own lives. And it is convenient to hand the work of resistance over to scientists, our designated national problem solvers.

We cannot march forth, confront, and definitively defeat the corporations of the world, especially not with science (which, it should go without saying, corporations have plenty of). We can, however, look at ourselves and see all of the ways that we conspire against what we imagine to be our own most urgent interests. Perhaps the most powerful way we conspire against ourselves is the simple fact that we have jobs. We are willingly part of a world designed for the convenience of what Shake-

speare called the "visible god": money. When I say we have jobs, I mean that we find in them our home, our sense of being grounded in the world, grounded in a vast social and economic order. It is a spectacularly complex, even breathtaking, order, and it has two enormous and related problems. First, it seems to be largely responsible for the destruction of the natural world. Second, it has the strong tendency to reduce the human beings inhabiting it to two functions, working and consuming. It tends to hollow us out. It creates a hole in our sense of ourselves and of this country, and it leaves us with few alternatives but to try to fill that hole with money and the things money buys. We are not free to dismiss money because we fear that we'd disappear, we'd be nothing at all without it.

Many people with environmental sympathies will agree with what I've just said and imagine that in fact they do what they can to resist work and consumption, to resist the world as arranged for the convenience of money. But here again I suspect we are kidding ourselves. Rather than taking the risk of challenging the roles money and work play in our lives by reordering our lives, the most prominent strategy of environmentalists seems to be to "give back" to nature through the bequests, the annuities, and the socially responsible mutual funds proliferating across the environmental movement. Such giving may make us feel better, but it will never be enough. Face it, we all have a bit of the robber baron turned philanthropist in us.

Even when we are trying to aid the environment, we are not willing as individuals to leave the system that we know in our heart of hearts is the cause of our problems. We are even further from knowing how to take the collective risk of leaving this system entirely and ordering our societies differently. We are not ready. Not yet, at least.

I am inevitably asked at this point in my argument just what exactly it is that I am proposing that people do. What would I put in capitalism's place? In reply, I am always tempted to quote Voltaire's response to the complaint that he had nothing to put in the place of the Christianity he criticized. "What!" he said. "A ferocious beast has sucked the blood of my family; I tell you to get rid of that beast, and you ask me, what shall we put in its place!" Unlike Voltaire, I would also suggest that what has the best chance of defeating the "beast" is spirit. In accepting science as our primary weapon against environmental destruction, we have also had to accept science's contempt for religion and the spiritual. This is the unfortunate legacy of sci-



Muledeer, wood inlay, by Alison Elizabeth Taylor, whose work was on display in April at Track 16 Gallery, in Santa Monica, California.

ence's two-century-old confrontation with what it has always called "religious dogma and superstition." But this attitude is myopic; it is science at its most stupid. Environmentalism should stop depending on its alliance with science for its sense of itself. It should look to create a common language of care (a reverence for and a commitment to the astonishing fact of Being) through which it could begin to create alternative principles by which we might live. As Leo Tolstoy wrote in his famous essay "My Religion," faith is not about obedience to church dogma, and it is not about "submission to established authority." A people's religion is "the principle by which they live."

The establishment of those principles by which we might live would begin with three questions. First, what does it mean to be a human being? Second, what is my relation to other human beings? And third, what is my relation to Being as such, the ongoing miracle that there is something rather than nothing? If the answer to these questions is that the purpose of being human is "the pursuit of happiness" (understood as success, which is understood as the

accumulation of money), and if our relation to others is a relation to mere things (with nothing to offer but their labor), and if our relation to the world is only to "resources" (which we should exploit for profit), then we should be very comfortable with the world we have. If it goes to perdition, at least we can say that we acted in good faith. But if, on the other hand, we answer that there should be a greater sense of self-worth in being a human, more justice in our relation to others, and more reverence for Being, then we must either live in bad faith with capitalism or begin describing a future whose fundamental values and whose daily activities are radically different from what we currently endure. The risk I propose is simply a return to our nobility.

We should refuse to be mere functions of a system that we cannot in good conscience defend. And we should insist on a recognition of the mystery, the miracle, and the *dignity* of things, from frogs to forests, simply because they *are*. Such a "religion" would entail a refusal to play through to the bloody end the social and economic roles into which we happen to have

been born. What lies beyond the environmental movement is not only the overcoming of capitalism but self-overcoming. We take some justifiable pride in the idea that we are environmentalists, but even that identity must be transcended. Does this mean that, for the time being, we stop working under the banner of environmentalism to oppose corporations when they are destructive? Of course not. But it is important to know that there is a problem more fundamental than a perverse "power" standing opposed to us. That deeper problem is our own integration into an order of work that makes us inhuman and thus tolerant of what is nothing less than demonic, the destruction of our own world. A return to the valuable human things of the beautiful and the useful will only be accomplished, if it is ever to be accomplished, by the humans among us.

[Conversation]

MEET THE AUTHOR!

From a 1986 interview with Austrian novelist and playwright Thomas Bernhard, first published in German last fall in Kultur & Gespenster and in English in December in signandsight. Bernhard, whose early novel Frost was published by Knopf last year, died in 1989. Werner Wögerbauer teaches at the University of Nantes, in France. Translated by Nicholas Grindell.

THOMAS BERNHARD: So, I'll just keep reading the paper—you don't mind, do you?

WERNER WÖGERBAUER: Well, no, by all means.

BERNHARD: You'll have to ask something, and then you'll get an answer.

WÖGERBAUER: Does the fate of your books interest you?

BERNHARD: No, not really. I'm hardly interested in my own fate and certainly not in that of my books.

WÖGERBAUER: Your characters and you yourself often say they don't care about anything.

BERNHARD: Not at all, you want to do something good, you take pleasure in what you do. Like a pianist—he has to start somewhere, too. He tries three notes, then he masters twenty, eventually he knows them all, and then he spends the rest of his life perfecting them. And what some do with notes, I do with words. Simple as that. I'm not really interested in anything else.

WÖGERBAUER: There is nothing but striving for perfection.

BERNHARD: Striving has always been nonsense.

The world has a pull that drags you whether you like it or not.

WÖGERBAUER: But this quest for perfection does play a role in your books.

BERNHARD: That's the attraction of any art.

That's all art is—getting better and better at playing your chosen instrument. No one can take that pleasure away from you or talk you out of it. If someone is a great pianist, you can clear out the room, fill it with dust, and then start throwing buckets of water at him, but he'll keep on playing. Even if the house falls down around him, he'll carry on playing.

WÖGERBAUER: So it has something to do with failure, then.

BERNHARD: Everything fails in the end, everything ends in the graveyard. The young people of today are running into the arms of death at age twelve, and they're dead at fourteen. There are solitary fighters who struggle on until eighty or ninety, then they die, too, but at least they had a longer life. Those who die early have less fun, and you can feel sorry for them. Because life also means a long life, with all of its awfulness.

WÖGERBAUER: What kind of intellectual aims do you—

BERNHARD: No one asks themselves that sort of thing. People don't have aims. Young people, up to twenty-three, they still fall for that. A person who has lived five decades has no aims, because there's no goal.

WÖGERBAUER: But when you describe yourself as a "destroyer of stories," that is a theoretical statement.

BERNHARD: Well, people say a lot of things in fifty years of life. If a reporter is sitting in a restaurant somewhere and he hears you say the beef's no good, then he'll always claim you're someone who doesn't like beef, for the rest of your life. You go for a walk in the woods, and someone takes a photo of you, then for the next eighty years you're always walking in the woods. There's nothing you can do about it.

WÖGERBAUER: You deliberately keep your distance from other living writers.

BERNHARD: No, not deliberately at all. It comes naturally. Where there's no interest, there can be no inclination.

WÖGERBAUER: Sometimes you hurl abuse at them too, like Elias Canetti or Peter Handke, for example.

BERNHARD: I don't hurl abuse at anyone at all. That's nonsense. Almost all writers are opportunists, and that's unpleasant. Why shouldn't that be said? One works with his illness and his death and wins prizes, and